



**Roman
Erich
Petsche**
and His
Kočevje
Region

Kočevo, church and monument
Pokrajinski muzej Kočevo, UM 35



Kočevo, church and monument, 1988
Pokrajinski muzej Kočevo, UM 38



Kočevo in 1970, 1972
Gottscheer Gedenkstätte



Kočevo, St Francis Chapel, 1984
Gottscheer Gedenkstätte



Kočevo
Pokrajinski muzej Kočevo, UM 31



An Artist Who Saw the World through His Heart

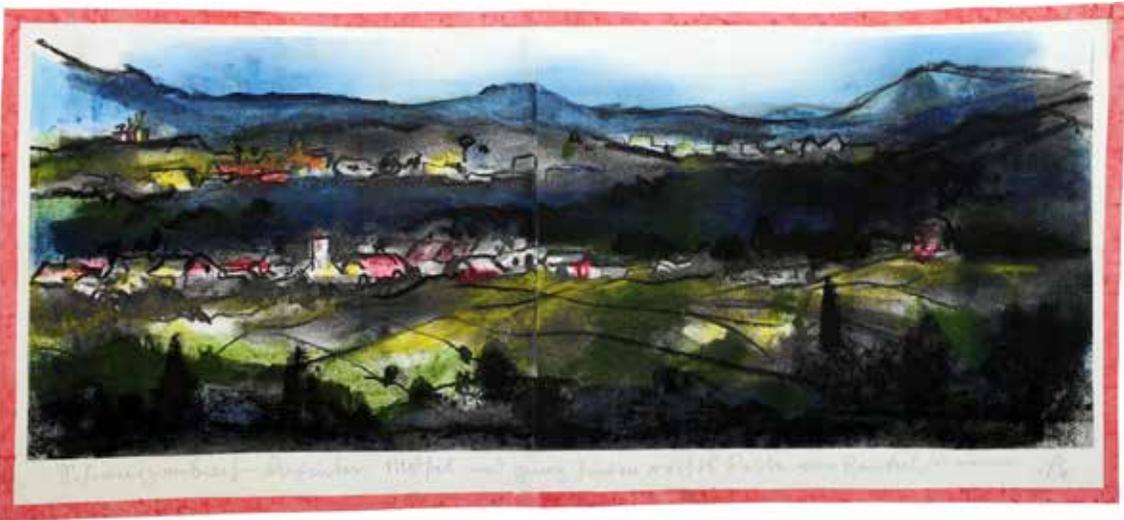
Although Roman Erich Petsche always remained deeply attached to his homeland, little attention was paid to him in Slovenia for a long time. This can probably, in part, be attributed to the fact that he had lived abroad as a teenager, and following the exodus of the Gottschee Germans at a later time, Slovenians no longer perceived him as a fellow countryman. For this reason, searching for his name in written accounts that mentioned the Slovenian 'Righteous among the Nations' would have been in vain even half a decade ago. In fact, it was not until the autumn of 2016, when a memorial plaque was unveiled on his birth house and the first exhibition of his works was staged in Kočevo, that he also became known in his home country.

Petsche's views on life were undoubtedly influenced by several factors. Firstly, by his origins, as he was born on 3 February 1907 as the son of a Gottschee man and a Polish woman from an old noble Galician family. Based on his grandmother's last name, Abraham, Petsche - the great-grandson of a Greek Catholic dean from Jakubowice in eastern Poland - believed that he may also have been of distant Jewish ancestry. Additionally, he felt the consequences of intolerance and bigotry from an early age: after World War I, his father was fired from his job at a teacher's college in Ljubljana and the family's home was given to a Serbian officer, forcing Petsche's family to emigrate to Austria. Moreover, two of his relatives died in Hitler's concentration camps and his cousin's husband, who was a Polish officer, never returned from Soviet captivity. This probably goes a long way towards explaining Petsche's attitude to the people

who were declared racially inferior by the Nazis and were thus meant to be eradicated as part of the so-called 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question'. After completing his education - he graduated from the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts with the title 'Magister artium' (Master of Arts) and also trained to be a teacher of drawing, design and technology for boys, mathematics and geometric drawing - Petsche worked as a teacher in several Austrian towns. Following the annexation of Austria to Hitler's Reich, Petsche lost his job at the teacher's college in St. Pölten, but did, however, manage to find a somewhat sustainable way of coexisting with the regime. Just before the war, Petsche 'voluntarily' joined the German air force, probably for tactical reasons and, while doing so, he pointed out his proficiency in mathematics. After the start of the war, he served as an officer at the meteorological service

and was stationed in Dniepropetrovsk (the present-day Dnipro), Bucharest and from 1944 in Novi Sad. In Novi Sad, the authorities accommodated Petsche in a flat that belonged to the Jewish Csernyei family. At the time, a relative of the Csernyeis, Vera Tibor, and her two daughters, Eva and Mira - later officially renamed Chava and Miriam - were also staying with the family. Vera's husband György, a prominent local lawyer, had fled to Hungary after the Germans entered Bačka, most likely to pave his family's way to safety. However, he was captured and disappeared without trace. Following this, Vera and her five-year-old twin daughters found refuge with her relatives. In the spring of 1944, the occupiers decided to deport the Jews to the concentration camps. Petsche, who learnt of these plans at work, urged his hosts to run away, but they were unwilling to leave their ill mother behind. At the last minute,

Panorama with a view of Movelj, 1988
Pokrajinski muzej Kočevje, UM 24



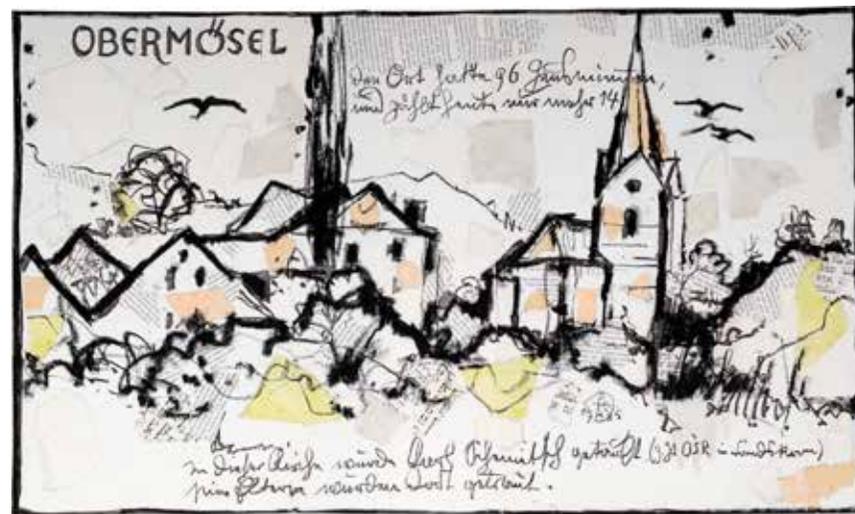
Petsche was only able to save the twin girls. He pretended to be their father and with the help of Tibor's housemaid, who passed as his wife, he took them to the train station and onwards to Budapest. The girls lived to see the end of the war in Pécs, where they had been hidden in a children's shelter by their relative, the nun Dr. Berta Rosenspitz. Of the twins' immediate relatives, only Vera's sister, Olga Csernyei, survived the war. Their grandmother died in the hospital that Petsche had taken her to following her relatives' deportation. Petsche took care of her until her death. The other family members died in concentration camps. After returning to her homeland, Olga - who had unfortunately not dared to jump off the train with her sister on the way to Germany and thus never made it to Petsche's actual wife as instructed by him - looked for her two nieces and moved to Israel with them. All three of them kept in touch

with Petsche, who had managed to protect their property from being plundered. On 3 May 1982, Petsche was awarded the honourable title 'Righteous among the Nations' by Yad Vashem at the suggestion of the twins. According to them, during the most difficult moments of their lives, Petsche appeared as a guardian angel in a Wehrmacht uniform, glowing with kindness and willingness to help. After the war, the former lieutenant, who is believed to have also saved the life of the Jewish physician Viktor Fenje, returned to his chosen career path. At the time of his retirement, he was a court councillor (Hofrat) and art education school inspector in Upper and Lower Austria and Burgenland. Petsche devoted himself to art throughout his life, even during the war. In 1985, he received the Austrian Cross of Honour for Science and Art in recognition of his achievements and seven years later, he was proclaimed

a knight of the Order of Saint Sylvester by Pope John Paul II as the creator of an extensive oeuvre of religion-inspired works, in particular depictions of various saints. Petsche, who never offered his paintings for sale, but only donated them, developed his own visual artistic language. According to theorists, his art was characterised by a gradual transition from naturalistic elements to partial abstraction and emphasised lines, which made his paintings reminiscent of stained glass. He also invented his own unique technique, which he referred to as 'original lumigraphy'. These were basically photocopied drawings to which he added collages made of newspaper clippings; he coloured them using different colours and added his own comments. Thus, he was able to create a series of paintings within a short span of time. These paintings had a common basis, each of them, however,

represented an individual work of art or a variation on a selected theme. Petsche died on 20 June 1995 in Ried im Innkreis, where he was laid to rest. In his youth, he had exhibited in Brussels, Paris, Salzburg, Vienna, Linz and elsewhere, while later the presentations of his work were mostly staged at his home under the honorary patronage of various prominent personalities, including the Austrian Chancellor. His works are now kept by several institutions. The largest collection of his paintings depicting the Kočevje region is kept by the Gottscheer Gedenkstätte (Gottschée Memorial) association from Graz. A selection of works from the collections of the association and Pokrajinski muzej Kočevje (Kočevje Regional Museum) present Petsche's most important qualities: both as an artist and as a human being in the best sense of the word. **Mihael Petrovič Jr.**

Movelj, 1985
Gottscheer Gedenkstätte



Roman Erich Petsche and the Pokrajinski muzej Kočevje

In 1982, Roman Erich Petsche was conferred the honourable title 'Righteous among the Nations', which is awarded by Yad Vashem - The World Holocaust Remembrance Centre to the non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews. Quite a lot is known about Petsche owing to Mihael Petrovič Jr., who has devoted a great deal of his time and attention to researching Petsche's life. On his initiative, in 2016 the Pokrajinski muzej Kočevje (Kočevje Regional Museum) held an exhibition of Petsche's works that are part of the collections in possession of the museum and the Gottscheer Gedenkstätte (Gottschee Memorial) association in Graz. A further tribute was paid to Petsche in September 2016 upon the unveiling of a memorial plaque on his birth house as part of the Days of Gottschee Culture.

The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue prepared by the museum and a leaflet published by the municipality of Kočevje, both of which were authored by Mihael Petrovič Jr. As was the case for the original exhibition, the touring exhibition staged at Sinagoga Maribor (Synagogue Maribor) features a selection of Petsche's works from the collections kept by the Gottscheer Gedenkstätte association and the Pokrajinski muzej Kočevje. The focus of the exhibition is on a number of family portraits, paintings of individual villages as well as buildings and other details from Kočevje and the surrounding villages, which are depicted in several of the exhibited works.

The exhibition, however, does not only cover Petsche's artworks. Another very important part of it is the artist's own life story and the stories of the people he had an impact on through his actions. His works have been exhibited in Ljubljana, Spittal an der Drau and Novi Sad. It was in the town of Novi Sad, where Petsche had selflessly helped a Jewish family he was staying with, and thanks to him, the then five-year-old twins lived to see the end of World War II.

The exhibited works of art, life stories and reflections on one's own actions make up the sort of complexity that remains highly relevant even in the present day. Preserving the memory of the people and events from bygone times is part of the mission of the Pokrajinski muzej Kočevje. I would like to express our thanks to Sinagoga Maribor for the opportunity for our two institutions to work together as we have a number of goals that can be achieved through joint projects.

Vesna Jerbič Perko,

Director of Pokrajinski muzej Kočevje

The preparation of the touring exhibition of works of art from the collections of the Gottscheer Gedenkstätte association from Graz and the Pokrajinski muzej Kočevje, as well as the publication of the accompanying leaflet, were funded by the municipality of Maribor and the Israeli Embassy.



POKRAJINSKI MUZEJ KOČEVJE



MESTNA OBČINA MARIBOR



Veleposlaništvo
Države Izrael

Self-portrait, 1986
Gottscheer Gedenkstätte



Roman Erich Petsche and His Kočevje Region

Art Exhibition

Center judovske kulturne dediščine Sinagoga Maribor
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